



Portrayal of Women in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal emerged as one of the most significant voices among women writers in the contemporary Indian Writings in English. She is a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award for her novel *Rich Like Us*. This paper deals with complex human relationships. It portrays the development of feminist consciousness, which is clearly apparent from the analysis of the characters. The paper also deals with the problems that the contemporary women face in the society. She beautifully probes the psyche of her women characters to reveal the trauma, insecurity and agony that lies beneath the gloss and glitter of modern life. She reveals her feminine sensibility more overtly in her choice of characters and concerns than in her style and language. She has tried to depict women suffering due to sexist bias in patriarchal society and she envisions a world which should be based on equality and harmony between the two sexes. During 1950's period Sahgal deals with the question that not only love, even marriage has no power to bind man to the woman. Marriage for man means getting comforts at every level while for woman it means a life of total dedicated service to a master. Ram Swarup inflicts great emotional violence on both women he marries. He sees every relationship in life in terms of his own advantage and delight. Despite his two marriages with Mona and Rose, he is infatuated with Marcella, and falls deeply in love with her. Sahgal strongly condemns the attitude which reduces women to an object.

Nayantara Sahgal in *Rich Like Us* renders a living picture of the oppressed, depressed and suppressed life of women in India. In this novel, there is also a juxtaposition of two worlds, the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. In this novel, she reflects the tension between the predicament of the contemporary Indian women and the traditional culture. She studies the social forces working on the psychology of the Indian women.

Paper

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the most prolific women writers who maintain her relevance today as a humanist with obvious feminist concerns. She is undoubtedly an outstanding Indian-English novelist and a political columnist on the Indian- English literary scene. Nayantara Sahgal's novels deal with a wide arrangement of themes ranging from personal quandary and problems, sorrows and joys, fulfillment and frustrations of female protagonists to the political upheavals that India has experienced since Independence. Her fiction is pre-occupied with the modern Indian woman's search for sexual autonomy and self- realization.

Nayantara Sahgal in *Rich Like Us*, renders a living picture of the oppressed, depressed and suppressed life of women in India. In this novel, there is also a juxtaposition of two worlds, the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. In this novel, she reflects the tension between the predicament of the contemporary Indian woman and the traditional Hindu culture. She studies the social forces working on the psychology of the Indian women.

Sahgal tries to make the narrative look more than merely a story of a woman by referring to Hinduism and Christianity and contemporary political scene. There are three women characters who dominate the plot of the novel. They are Rose, Mona and Sonali. These three women were of different nature and upbringing. However they were similar in one aspect, that is, their courage to face things. Sahgal presents man-woman relationship between Sonali and Ravi, Ram and Mona, Ram and Rose, Mona and Rose, Ram and Marcella, and Dev and Rose. Actually, love-hate relationship proposes human beings towards the doors of shameless compromise with the vigilant consciousness and severe compulsion. Actually, love-hate relationship proposes human beings towards the doors of shameless compromise with the vigilant consciousness and severe compulsion. Ram is one of the chief characters, who take pride in possessing fanciful goods like European finery and imported goods. This taste has a symbolic reference to his character. He is extravagant even in possessing wives; in the place of one he has three- one from India (Mona), another from U.K (Rose), and another one from Europe (Marcella). When Rose seeks for a Divorce, he says that the Hindu marriage is sacred and it does not permit a divorce.

It is ironical that despite his name being Ram, he violates the sanctity of the marriage by not being loyal to his wife. He lacks values and morals and has very trivial and superficial perceptions of things. He is not able to apply his discretion for good and bad. Ram belongs to an orthodox Indian family. He has a wife Mona, who is a pious orthodox and purely Indian traditional and cultured lady. Mona is a wife to her husband. Here too the devotion of a wife towards her husband is that which keeps the family bond intact. She observes prayers, bhajans and fasting for the welfare and long life of Ram. Mona is the example of a typical Hindu woman who dares not raise a voice against any action of her husband. When Ram brings home his second wife, Rose, she does not utter a single word against his action but weeps in silence.

Rose and Mona are the co-wives of Ram. The two ladies become puppets in the hands of a man called, Ram. Ram, already married and with a newborn child in India, is found free to court Rose in England. Only when he is assured of her deep love for him, he announces that he is already married. He later goes to the extent

of marrying Rose even though Mona, her first wife, is in the same house. In the license of husband, he played with their feelings and emotions according to his whims and fancies, unmindful of their self. However, they remain his wives, keeping the culture and at the same time guarding their individuality and dignity.

Mona, the legal wife of Ram, and the lady of the household was badly humiliated and hurt by her husband, a heartless male. Mona was very much shattered by the arrival of Ram with a second wife. Mona, for him is meant for looking after his son and house while Rose is to shower love and attention on him. The war between Rose and Mona is the reflection of India's trouble and turmoil that India went through during Quit India Movement and Partition. Rose was an intruder, a usurper in Mona's home.

Sahgal's novels rotate on the federation of married life of their women protagonists and her novels turn out to be discourses on gender discrimination of women in the unit of family and in society. *Rich Like Us*, though a novel with political background i.e. on the theme of Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975 also concentrates on a very serious and vital set of gender issues. Sree Rashmi Talwar in her book *Women's Space: The Mosaic World of Margaret Drabble and Nayantara Sahgal* aptly observes "But this does not mean that *Rich Like Us* is primarily a political novel. What makes it interesting is that it is actually the story of two women-Rose, a cockney memsahib and Sonali, a civil servant-each in her own way representing the New Women." (1)

In an interview given in 1990, Nayantara Sahgal defined what politics signified for her. According to her a political novel would be an awareness of the use of power whether it is directly in politics or reflected in domestic life or other aspects of it. "I think of politics not a leading the country but politics as the use of power and also the abuse of power-it happens at so many levels." (2) There is very sensitive representation of the way woman suffers due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society which gives a subordinate position to woman and always treats them as second grade citizens.

A women's whole existence is seen in relation to the service she can render to her husband. In Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* Ram Swarup, a Lahore businessman, also perceives every relationship in life in terms of his own benefit and fulfillment. He wreaks great emotional violence on his wife. He is insensitive to the feelings of his first wife Mona and brings an English wife Rose after she has given birth to his son. Ram gets pleasure in courtship with Rose and when Rose is fully ensnared by his love, casually he tells Rose that he had a wife and an infant child. He doesn't bother for Mona's reaction as if women were part of his kennel and he was free to add as many members to it as he liked. Mona rather than blaming her husband for marrying again, resorts to "calling upon almighty to spell out what she had done in this or past lives to deserve such outrageous treatment." (RLU 62) It was a normal thing for him, that in spite of being married and blessed with the son he was enjoying courtship with her but for Rose it was a shock because a married man also having a son was talking about courtship in a very normal way as if there was nothing wrong about it, "And one afternoon he told her, in a natural every day voice that he had a wife and an infant child. Her shock was so great she couldn't

speak. But after some second's silence she had begun asking questions about them in what she hoped was her natural voice, while her brain grappled with this new turmoil, and a man who could talk about a courtship with her when he was already married and a father.” (RLU 41-42) When in a crushed voice Rose says “How can we get married when you're married?” Ram's tart response is “My religion lets a man have more than one wife”. (RLU 42) Like every mother, Rose's mother is also worried about marriage of her daughter.

It is generally thought that marriage is the ultimate aim of every girl. So Rose's mother is also vexed because she is marrying a person who is already married and is also having is son. In the patriarchal society when the girl is married she comes under the protection cover of her husband. In spite of the warnings given by mother Rose, the English woman without a backward glance breaks an almost settled engagement with Freddie and marries Ram who comes from alien culture. Rose loves her husband Ram so dearly that she is willing to leave behind her home and everything she knows in England to take a position of second wife. She is willing to sacrifice everything to be with him and is bold enough to cross all racial and class obstacles. There is a strange fatalism about her yielding to Ram's influence and her decision to sale to India. As Rose is the second wife of Ram she as a result has to endure disgrace and hostility in the house as she is looked upon as an intruder, by Mona. For her marriage is just an ambush/trap to entice her into the life of denial and suffocation, in the service of man, with no assurance of anything for her. Thus the adjustment required of her was at many levels, requiring not only the acceptance of joint family system, but also the feeling of guilt aroused by the pretence of Ram's first wife and her child. She had abandoned all—her home, her country, her parents, even the familiar structure of love and marriage.

Rose gets fed up of Ram living with two wives. She initially feels angry ,bitter and wronged and reaches the pinnacle of being wronged when Ram has to leave him and go to Mona to console her weeping fits .He just overlooks her pain by turning the whole issue into a funny/ comic account. He was stretched out on his bed too good humoured and too lazy to quarrel. He cited the example of Lord Krishna light heartedly “Lord Krishna had three hundred” Ram refers to Ramayana, Mahabharat and Quran where the protagonists are allowed to have more than one wives. He justifies his idea taking the cover of traditional sanction of bigamy and polygamy: “King Dasrath, Ram's father, had four wives” he went on amiably. I thought it was Mohammedans who had four wives.” “Muslim can have only four, at a time. We are more adventurous, even polyandrous.” (RLU 63) Ram considers Love merely a sport providing pleasure and woman is just object in front of man. Woman is born just to give sensual pleasure to man. Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* also argues, “She is called the sex by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex -- absolute sex, no less...She is the incidental, she inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute—she is the other.” (7) For Ram age is no obstacle for love affairs. Despite two marriages, he is infatuated by Marcella, young beautiful British lady and falls deeply in love with her. Rose finds herself to be an interloper: She and Ram had behaved like the right full lovers making Rose the outsider.

When Rose asks for an elucidation of his affair with Marcella, he explains to Rose that he feels intellectual love for Marcella and feels pride by stating that before her .He was so much involved in her love

that he even distances from Rose. Neena Arora in her book *Nayantara Sahgal and Dorris Lessing: A Feminist Study in Comparison* observes, “While Ram refers to Ramayana and Mahabharata to justify his bigamy, Rose on the contrary is struck with the character of Sita. Sita repeatedly figures in the narrative as the archetype of the wronged woman, and Rose at various crucial moments in her life thinks of Sita.”(8) Communication is the breath of married life. He shares nothing with her. She is left unaccompanied throughout the day and all through the night, occasionally by Ram on her side and sometimes alone on bed. There is no communication between them for four months. He is ensnared by Marcella. His first wife Mona is very much upset on bringing Rose as his second wife. Now Rose suffers as Ram switches off to Marcella even after having two wives. Like Mona, Rose is equally helpless to do anything. Thus a tale within a tale is enacted. “The enchantress Marcella in the fairy tale had let down her hair, and the candidate for bewitchment. Ram has grasped the golden rope and climbed up into the tower.”(RLU 115) After analyzing Sahgal’s novel from feministic perspective, it may be concluded that she is strongly against female-exploitation and chauvinistic view of male community for the identity crisis for women.

With the portrayal of Rose and Mona, Nayantara Sahgal also explains the concept of ‘sisterhood’ which means women must develop friendship among them and assert their identification with one another. All women are united and they all are sisters. But as Juliet Mitchell and Annoakley explain, the “concept of sisterhood means much more than sharing work or responsibility. It involves a redefinition of the value and status of personal experience. The personal becomes the political; that is, the nature of women’s oppression can be analyzed through the medium of accounts of private experience.” In such a world of injustice and exploitation the only hope for a woman is another woman. Placed in identical situation both the doubly marginalized women Rose and Mona develop a close bond. They become “sisters” in their suffering and start helping each other in achieving freedom and they also offer solace,-help and support to each other. Intimacy develops between Rose and Mona when the former saves the latter from attempting suicide. After this incident, Mona who earlier never accepted the ‘intruder’ in her life now welcomes her with open arms as her sister – “We are sisters!” (155). Mona develops a deep relationship with Rose and asks her about her parents in London and starts seeking help and advice in every matter. These co-wives united together in their suffering and finally turn to each other for comfort and solace. Mona while dying looks at Rose for comfort, for peace and entrusts Rose for the responsibility of bringing up Dev, her son. Later Rose in her hour of grief and loneliness turns up to Sonali for solace and help. Sonali helps Rose against the oppression of Dev, who intends to seek all kind of help for Rose from bureaucrats to politicians. This bond of sisterhood against male-domination is one of the tools by which women hope to fight the male world.

Sonali in *Rich Like Us* is the young and independent unmarried I.A.S. officer. For an idealist like Sonali it meant the end of a dream, the extinguishing of a bright flame of promise for the country’s future that had burned since independence. So as a Civil Servant, she is demoted and humiliated through a corrupt deal at governmental level. She is time and again pulled down because she fails to compromise on her ideals. Sonali is quite different from the stereotype image of women found in Indo- English fiction. As she is a spinster, she is free from martial disharmony. Her problem is how to cope with the hypocrisy, corruption in the Indian

administrative service. Sonali is an intellectual, independent yet committed to communal good, uncompromisingly conscientious and idealistic. She refuses to interpret the rules to suit the people. All along she is against the current. She revolts against the authoritarianism of ruling government. She symbolizes Sahgal's philosophy of active intervention in life. She realizes that her administrative training has not prepared her for handling the new situation which has arisen out of political concerns dominating the administrative.

Sonali is one of the main women characters, an alter ego of Sahgal, is defined by contrast to traditional models of feminine identity. It is in relation to Sonali's unorthodoxy that the direction of the post-independence change regarding traditional feminine identities in India can be discussed. While following differences between gender norms that are expected to accommodate these changes. "A woman is helpless and frustrated in India is seen in the portrayal of Nishi, Dev's wife, a contrasting character to oppose Sonali and Rose. She is more than willing to do everything to please 'the top' and consequently, push her husband ahead. In *Rich like us* she gave impression of a puppet, wire-pulled and mastermind, trotting out conventional, feather - light responses' imprisoned 'inside those delicate bird bones' acquires yet again the look of a 'doll in mechanical mourning'." (221-222). She recalls how hours after she had delivered the first baby, no one had even cared to ask what she felt about becoming a mother. It can be inferred that the woman in this novel are aware of the injustice done to them by men but they succumb to the exploitation mutely. Except Sonali, the rest are victims of an inadequate model of female selfhood.

In Sonali, we find a woman whose life is affected by the various twists and turns of Indian politics. During the Emergency, her strong opinions on democracy cost her job, an event she accepts as symptomatic of changing times. Yet how helpless the times have made her can be seen when she can do nothing to stop Dev from forging Ram's cheques. Her decision to resign from the civil services is clearly her refusal to compromise with dictatorship. Authoritarian governments rest themselves on the support and silence of the civil servants, like Ravi Kachru. Sonali, however, is different. She says "When the constitution becomes null and void by the act of a dictator... confronts you, *Satyagraha* is the only way to keep your self-respect." (198)

In her fictional depiction of women attempting to free themselves from repressive relationships, Sahgal is more direct in her feminist sympathies. She makes a systematic and sustained effort to demolish deeply ingrained attitudes regarding women, before indicating ways in which a new image can be formulated. With an admirable steadfastness, she upholds her commitment to man woman relationships based on mutual trust and honest communication between two equal individuals.

Feminism, we may claim, has now found a space in the academic culture of India. But in not so distant a past as the late seventies and early eighties of this century, such a movement in India had provoked, perhaps still continues to provoke, in some way, a sense of animosity, an outrage, and was regarded as an affront to culture. What many have failed to understand is that feminism questions the moribund notion of what a woman is, it motivates woman to action by resisting inequity and injustice, and finally leads her to the discover her being human.

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